

THE CONVERSATION

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Brussels airport attacks are not just a matter of airport security

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Shattered windows after multiple explosions at a Brussels airport in Zaventem. EPA/Laurent Dubrule

The deadly terror attack in Brussels has again raised the issue of safety and security at airports. But expanding the “security bubble” around airports might not be the best response.

Europe barely had the time to recover from the horror of the Paris attacks last November before another of its capital cities was hit at its heart, presumably by ISIS terrorists.

In a devastated Brussels, investigations are running at full speed and authorities are already flooded with questions about the vulnerability of their critical infrastructure.

Unfortunately, this refrain seems to resurface every time a terrorist attack achieves its goals.

Traditionally, governments respond to these events by setting higher security standards. In this sense, modern airports epitomise the significant improvements that have been achieved in security over the

Author



Ivano Bongiovanni

PhD Candidate in Airport Safety and Security; Sessional Academic in Strategic Management, Queensland University of Technology

past decades, especially after the September 11 attacks in the US in 2001.

Screening

Security screening has proved to be an effective deterrent against acts of terror such as hijacking and bombing. Following a procedure that is typical of security risk management, the security bubble around the vulnerable element – in this case, the airplane – has been progressively expanded in order to keep malicious individuals out.

The sterile area in a modern airport is among the most secure places on Earth. However, the terminal buildings can still be threatened, such as when the Glasgow airport was hit by a vehicle ramming attack in 2007.

In the aftermath, more stringent regulations were put into place to prevent vehicles from getting too close to the terminal buildings. Thus the security bubble was further expanded.

Even so, in 2011 two suicide bombers managed to kill more than 30 people at Moscow's Domodedovo airport by walking into the baggage claim area and activating their Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). This was an act strikingly similar to what just happened in Brussels.

Increase security?

What should be our response to the latest attack? In the next few days we will probably hear more requests for strengthened airport security. Some might argue for a further expansion of the security bubble in order to cover the check-in area or entrance of the terminal buildings.

Would that be an effective solution? I don't think so, for three main reasons.

First, the costs associated with the implementation of such a security system would largely outweigh the benefits; the bigger the area, the more expensive its protection.

Second, the associated operational disruptions would require some time (and a lot of patience) to be contained. When the perceived threats are low, people tend to consider security measures as an annoyance rather than a safeguard. Most of time, security awareness is not an ingrained mindset.

Third, and most important, the effectiveness of this new security system would still be questionable. Expanding the bubble would just move its boundaries outwards, with no guarantee that a new attack won't happen on its edge.

For example, if security were increased before reaching the check-in at the airport, that might cause crowds to gather outside the main doors, and this would present a new target for terrorist attack.

So expanding the bubble would be just another symmetric response to an issue that has proven highly asymmetric.

This last point, in particular, emphasises that the Brussels' airport attacks are not just a matter of airport security. They involve the need to reconsider our perception of modern security risks.

Where people gather

Airport security works very well these days. The problem is that, especially in some countries, any gathering involving more or less large crowds is a vulnerable target for terrorist attack.

Sport events, public transport, concerts, and even the queue in front of a museum, constitute a potential target for malicious individuals.

This requires governments to adopt a different approach to security. Security management needs to be performed at an asymmetric level, penetrating our societies and engaging terrorists at the individual level.

Random security checkpoints, enhanced intelligence networks and additional investments in street-level security technologies are some examples of asymmetric countermeasures that should be strengthened.

Technology, in particular, seems to be a powerful ally in our fight against terrorism. Especially when technological development is associated with the reduction of security costs.

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